Emergence of a Hampton Roads School

By Matthew Steven Pierce

Palimpsest: Hampton Roads. Source: PAST AS PRESENT: THEN AS NOW - by James Lancel McElhinney

Introduction / Palimpsest / Escape Land and Sally Mann

AJ Cuffee and I were filming our documentary *Virginia is for Lovers* with Chelsea Pierce when she walked us over to a painting by James McElhinney entitled *Palimpsest: Hampton Roads*, made in 1998, it's a massive mixed-media canvas layered with Civil War newspaper text, period engravings, maps, portraits of Union and Confederate officers, and underneath all of it-or maybe through all of it, the water, the Hampton Roads harbor. The place where, in March of 1862, the ironclad CSS Virginia met the USS Monitor and changed naval warfare forever. McElhinney pressed the history directly into the surface. The older text bleeds through the new marks. Nothing is fully erased. That is what a palimpsest is: a manuscript where old writing was scraped away and written over, but the original never completely disappears and keeps showing through.

Virginia is a palimpsest; And so, not coincidentally, is the art being made here right now.

Escape Land by Hampton Boyer. Source: Reynolds Gallery

Chelsea walked us over to see this after we were filming Hampton Boyer's giant painting "Escape Land", which is poetic to me, a black artist from Hampton Roads, named Hampton, whose work is sitting in a museum in Virginia, on the soil of the birthplace of America.. it seemed important that I open with that. It's metaphorical to me, he kicked the door down in my eyes. A major acquisition from an institution that I don't think I had the foresight to imagine. Not for a local artist, but he's not the only one, The Chrysler has also acquired works from Heather Beardsley and Rowena Finn as well. These are all friends and

peers of mine, that lets me know something new is happening. Is it because of Chelsea Pierce's youthful curatorial and self described "After-Duchamp" ideology? I'm not sure but I know she's playing a major role, no matter how humble she comes across. Not far from that McElhinney painting, is a Sally Mann; one of the most important photographers this country has ever produced and a Virginian to her core, made her Battlefields series using a large-format camera and a specialized developing process borrowed from Civil War photographers themselves. The images are dark, spectral, disintegrating at the edges. Her photograph of Antietam, Battlefields, Antietam (*Soldier's Tree*), 2001, looks less like a document of history than a memory the land is trying to process. The soil she photographed had absorbed the blood of what remains the single bloodiest day in American military history. Seventeen thousand men wounded or killed in one day on American soil. The tree in that photograph was there. It remembers. Mann made the photograph look like it remembers too.

I am not beginning here to be literary. I am beginning here because if you want to understand what is happening in Hampton Roads right now.. what these artists are making, and WHY, you have to understand what ground they are standing on. Chelsea Pierce, one of the most important curators working in this region, said something while we were filming that I had to include, "Virginia is the birthplace of the original sins of this country."

She's right. It's a wound and it's a condition. These artists are not victims of Virginia's history. They are its most complicated, most alive, most clear-eyed inheritors. They are standing on ground that has held slavery and revolution, Confederate capital and Union harbor, the first permanent English settlement and centuries of violent contradiction, and they are making work that does not flinch from any of it. They aren't performing awareness,

it's just that.. you can't live here and not feel the weight underneath your feet.

This is the lens in which I view the art from here.

I. **This Isn't a Conspiracy / The Condition / Post-What?**

Let me try to describe the moment we are actually inside, because I think it matters enormously for understanding what this work is doing and why it feels the way it does.

Helen Frankenthaler, *The Bay*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 204.2 x 208.6 x 2.2 cm (Detroit Institute of Arts; photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) @ Estate of Helen Frankenthaler

The Abstract Expressionists are called post-war because that is what they were. They made their most important work in the shadow of World War II, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb. They were processing incomprehensible violence from a position of historical distance, and that distance gave their work its particular combination of anguish and freedom. They were after something. The war ended and they were trying to make sense of the aftermath.

We are inside it, and the "it" keeps expanding and the edges keep moving. I watched a video on Instagram.. I did not go looking for it, the algorithm simply delivered it to me between whatever else I was scrolling through, it was a video of Israeli soldiers in Gaza playing a real-life version of Squid Games' red light, green light. There were people being offered food...starving people. On green light, the Israeli soldiers opened fire and on red light they stopped, I stopped watching, but apparently this continued in a cycle. This was filmed and distributed through the same platform that shows me art, memes, advertisements, and puppy videos. That's the condition and the 'feed' we are all living inside.

From 1955, artist William Millarc takes part in an LSD experiment alleged to have been part of the MK-ULTRA program.

The Epstein files revealed that some of the most powerful men in the world are doing things that would sound like conspiracy theories if they weren't documented. MK-Ultra; the CIA's actual, declassified mind control program isn't a theory. The Tuskegee Experiments and Operation Sea Spray.. aren't fiction. The government of the United States of America has run psychological and physiological experiments on its own citizens without their consent since the nation's inception. Elon Musk is the wealthiest human being in all of recorded history, that concentration of wealth at the hands of one individual is obscene, as of the time of this writing is 1.2 *trillion* dollars and counting. While the public collapses and artists starve. The institutions that were supposed to organize meaning; governments, universities, museums, the press.. are visibly failing, visibly captured, or visibly for sale.

And then there is artificial intelligence. AI is the logical endpoint of image saturation. It is the moment the image fully detaches from human experience and begins producing itself and regurgitating an infinite loop of pictures that already happened and never happened, generated faster than any human eye/mind can process them, flooding the same feed that carries the genocide... and the advertisements... and the memes and the *all of it*. The distinction between the real and the fabricated has collapsed.

This is the specific, documented, historically unprecedented condition of being alive, conscious ***and*** making objects by hand in 2026, when everything can be generated and the image has been weaponized beyond recognition, and the ground itself is the most honest thing left. Which brings me back to Virginia, and to the water, and to what is growing from this fertile soil.

II. Landscape / The Hampton Roads / Local Artists with Global Appeal

The Hampton Roads is not a city, it's seven cities: Norfolk, Portsmouth, Hampton, Newport News, Chesapeake, Virginia Beach, Suffolk.. they behave less like a metropolitan area and more like pieces of a broken mirror, each one reflecting something slightly different, none of them giving you the complete picture. There are shipyards and naval bases, tunnels under the harbor, flood-prone neighborhoods and studios hidden

inside ordinary buildings. It is one of the largest military complexes on earth with the largest shipyard in the Americas. The psychic atmosphere of the place is shaped by ships and trains' departure and return. Outsiders rarely understand it on the first visit, it has to be learned.

The art has inherited the region's scattered, and resistant logic. It doesn't cohere into a single aesthetic or present itself conveniently. Like the region itself, it has to be approached slowly, from multiple directions, with patience.. and it rewards that patience with something transformative.

What you find, (if you look), is a scene that formed under slow; inevitable; pressure. This isn't the pressure of the market and it's not an institutional expectation. This isn't the market pressure of making art without an audience. The pressure of developing a practice in relative isolation from the art world's machinery, of being in constant contact with global image culture while not being treated like a world center yourself. I have never been to Art Basel and I don't go to NYC often, though I have stood in the MOMA and the Metropolitan and felt the full weight of what those collections represent, but I make my work here. Most of these artists make their work here. And what I want to argue, what I believe with the same certainty I believe anything.. is that this isolation isn't a deficit. It is why the work here still has that sense of undiscovered force.

Art that can form without the narcotic of attention tends to *know* things that a lot of celebrated art forgets. It knows what it actually needs to say, because no one has bribed it into saying something easier.

III. The Orbits

In 2014, Hampton Boyer co-founded 670 Gallery in Hampton, but Boyer did not stay at 670 Gallery. He had a larger idea.

Together with Asa Jackson, Boyer helped build what has become one of the gravitational centers of the Hampton Roads contemporary arts body: *The Contemporary Arts Network*. Known affectionately as the CAN. Based in Newport News, operating out of a building that functions as a studio space, a gallery and a communal checkpoint. The CAN is the closest thing this area has to the Cedar Tavern, to the Factory, to 291 Gallery, to any of the mythic physical spaces around which the great movements of art history organized themselves.

During the CAN workshops, there is a lot going on. Musicians are recording, the walls, ceilings, floors, and exterior of the building completely covered with Dathan Kane's black and white overlapping shapes. Asa and Kira Jackson are asking deeply

philosophical questions that have no answers, we were all sitting in a circle critiquing each other's work and discussing what is possible. Asa was like a ringleader, easily floating in and out of conversations with big personalities, but never betraying his own sense of self to shrink himself in the presence of said personalities. He occupies such an important position in this region and it would be too narrow to speak of him only as an artist.. though the work itself warrants attention.

His corduroy pieces, with their dyed, cut, assembled, and often horizon-like structures, have the patience of textile labor and the ambition of painting. They aren't landscapes even though you can feel land and atmosphere in them, and they aren't quilts, though the history of the quilt hovers nearby. They aren't color-field paintings, though they understand color as field and pressure. Their material has not been neutralized into support; it remains corduroy, with all its associations of clothing, use, labor, tactility, and bodily memory.

Asa's name holds weight in the Hampton Roads in a way that suggests social force rather than mere reputation. Artists speak of him not only as someone who makes work, but as someone who made work seem possible. That distinction isn't sentimental.. it's historical. Every serious art movement requires galvanizers like him. Alongside Kira Jackson, through the CAN, Asa has helped create an atmosphere in which artists can imagine careers, not just practices. This is a subtler achievement than the production of a signature style, and an even rarer one.

Raeesah Islam belongs to this same category of figure, though her work has unfolded through another kind of space-making. Through Utopia Feni, she's built one of those rooms that artists

keep returning to. Historians record these spaces too late, if they record them at all. For years, Raeesah has given artists, poets, musicians, vendors, and young creative people a place to commune *before* we've realized what kind of *renaissance* we were in. I spoke to Raeesah about this documentary project and how I don't want all of the existential belonging we've felt to be reduced to oral passed down stories. What's happening is unprecedented and we should start acting like it. I see it the same way I see photos of Keith Haring partying with Jean-Michel.. someone had the foresight to photograph these moments because they felt like *something* was happening. The consciousness in and around the scene were in an elevated state and if you had a good antenna you were picking up on it. Raeesah has cultivated an environment of creative freedom. These all may seem peripheral to the *formal* art world, but gathering places like this are often where a scene discovers its own density.

Utopia Feni is a nonprofit, but to call it a nonprofit alone would flatten its meaning. Its origin reaches back to Islam's desire to build creative opportunity crossing over from Virginia Beach and beyond to her father's village in Feni, Bangladesh. The project has always contained this double movement: to sustain a local creative community in Hampton Roads while imagining how art, ethical sourcing, education, and work might matter elsewhere too. That ambition could easily have remained abstract. Instead, in Virginia Beach, it became a safe space where individuals have the chance to return again and again. We as a collective contemporary arts community are fortunate and privileged to have not one, but two landmark galvanizing figures, Asa Jackson in Newport News and Raeesah Islam in Virginia Beach.

Amber and I's relationship with Raeesah goes back over a decade to Amber's early internship at Utopia Feni, where she was Raessah's first intern actually it goes back to the Governor's School for the Arts (GSA), where Raeesah was a senior and Amber was a freshman, so that would put their first meeting in 2010. My first solo exhibition was through GSA and my second

was through Raeesah at Utopia Feni in 2019. There were many vendors and performers who passed through its orbit, which to me suggests a form of cultural labor that precedes recognition. Before a museum can acquire.. someone has to make a room where people believe it's worth showing up to.

GSA is another artist's orbit. It is a specialized school for gifted youth. You can only get in through intensive portfolio review. The best of the best students only. GSA students were being awarded over 3 million dollars a year to attend higher education in those days. Because of GSA I was accepted into every university I applied to. Virginia Commonwealth University, Old Dominion University, and the Maryland Institute College of Art where I received a large scholarship to attend. Ultimately I opted to stay in Hampton Roads and attended Old Dominion University where I received the now defunct Drawing and Design degree. The focus of my studies was graphic design through a contemporary arts lens. I want to talk briefly about what I consider to be the GSA *school*. Almost all of my peers who attended either left the region or switched career paths entirely, Amber and I stayed. To tell you the truth we feel a bit "othered" within the context of this scene, which is probably why I decided to write about this in the first place, to contextualize it all. Part of the ethos of the GSA school would be constant intellectual group critiques, intensive Friday drawing sessions with nude models and still lives, and university level art history courses in high school. We would attend our high school, and after lunch hop on a bus that took us to GSA until around 5 - 6 pm depending on what shift you were in. It was intense work, and that intense work puts us in a different category of register. I want the public to know that we are still emerging, but also that we are steeped in art historical knowledge, and years of experimentation with ideas and materials.

Number 10 (2026) by Matthew S. Pierce. Source: Instagram @matthewstevenpierce

A scene becomes a movement when artists begin to believe that their local circumstances contain enough intellectual force to withstand comparison with the world. That belief is not easily manufactured and it can't be solved by branding. It has to pass from person to person, studio to studio, conversation to conversation, until ambition stops feeling like delusion.

IV. The Trees Have Eyes / The Material / THE ARTISTS INTERTWINED

The question of material is not a formal question because it's a political one. Consider what it means, in 2026, to make something by hand.. the deliberate, slow, bodily act of making becomes a different kind of statement. It's radical. The human mark in the age of generated imagery is an argument. It says: this came from a body, from a specific history, from hands that have touched specific materials in a particular place at a particular time. It cannot be replicated. It cannot be generated. It knows things that the algorithm "***don't***", because it comes from somewhere the algorithm has never been.

Amber Pierce's vessels know this. Her ceramics don't behave like studio pottery in the narrow, collectible sense. They sag, wrinkle, soften, carry images the way memory carries images.. imperfectly, with damage, like a game of telephone, with survival written into the surface. Their blue-and-white glazes invoke the entire history of porcelain trade, and decorative hierarchies.

She roughens the language surrounding the long confusion between beauty and possession, refuses its *smooth* authority and insists on another inheritance. Amber came up; first-generation university student, double majoring in art education and 3-D material studies, through juried exhibitions and fellowships and craft institutions like NCECA. Her use of craft-associated forms is not intuitive in a way that denies rigor. It is rigorous in a way that redefines what rigor can mean. She is a trailblazer, she is hardly the first woman artist to work with craft materials, but she is one of the first to embroider frames around her paintings, one of the first to fuse ceramics and fibers, and one of the first to popularize craft work in *this* particular scene. She does not need the Western canon's validation to speak to it. She speaks from somewhere older and deeper.

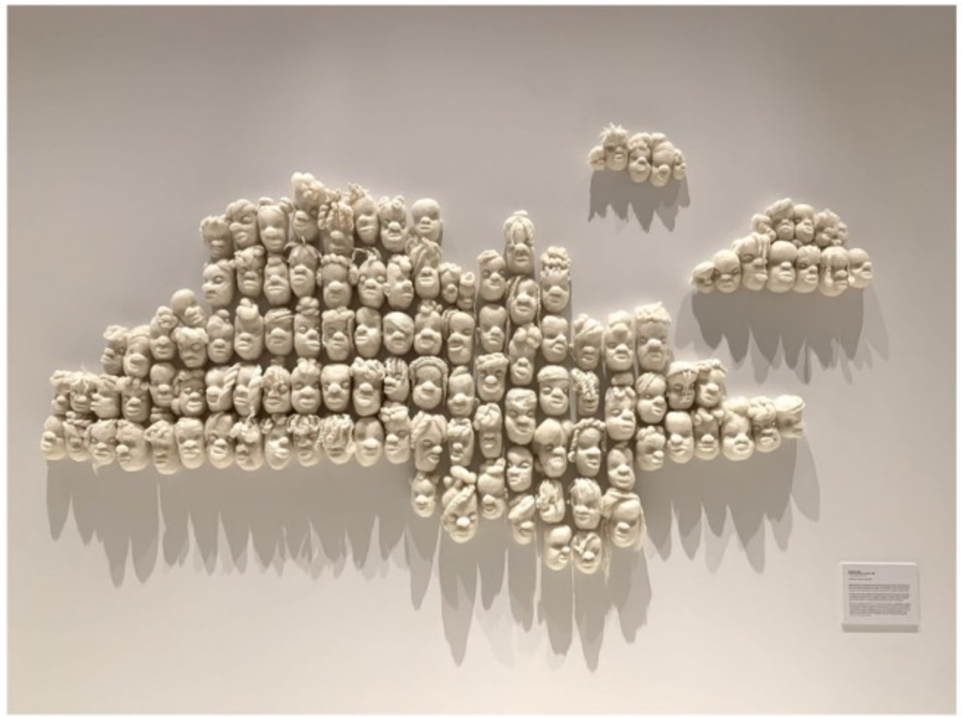
She honors the creative legacies of enslaved descendants of African tradition. MarieAnn (Flower) Fluker's fabric pictures extend this into the domestic interior as an archive. For communities historically denied stable institutional preservation,

the record of a culture has often survived in the cloth itself.. and in the way garments were made, mended and passed down. They've survived in the choreography of care that surrounds objects and bodies.

Title : Unknown by MarieAnn (Flower) Fluker

Fluker's stitched environments carry this knowledge without turning it into illustration. Her hand is visible not as decoration but as ethics, just like in Asa's work. Fluker is a perpetual pupil and one of the most talented fledglings to watch. The fact of *making* is in and of itself part of what she is saying. Nastassja E. Swift's felted works push this idea further into the uncanny. She is among the elite of art makers that still lives and works in this region. She has created work alongside powerhouses like Bisa Butler, and is of the upper echelon of contemporary artists here.

This helps to legitimize the scene in my view. The materials she selects invite touch, but the repetition of black bodies and heads troubles that invitation, it's beautiful and ominous.



A face appears, then another face, then many faces, until the individuals dissolve into collective weight. Swift works with the sack as form and it carries a symbolic density that resists any single reading, the histories they invoke are not simple. Swift isn't just making statements about history, she's creating objects with materials that *carry* history the way a body carries trauma and it's not on the surface, it's embedded in the DNA.

Rowena Federico Finn's Balut series takes its name from the Filipino street food, a fertilized duck egg, a life chosen to be cut short so that another life can be nourished. Finn is fascinated by this: a life in the making, but interrupted, its potential now redirected. Her Balut pieces are mixed beads sewn onto piña fabric, the traditional Philippine textile woven from pineapple fibers. There is a stone suspended from golden silk thread representing the burden of familial and communal expectation, its size measured against its perceived weight. Finn works in capiz shell and Philippine materials. Her installation Crowd Control, with its suspended capiz and accumulated fingerprints, does something remarkable at scale, it's beautiful.

Nikki Leone's tufted forms enter from a different angle but belong to the same dismantling of hierarchy. Leone is comfortable with pleasure and pattern. She's comfortable with everything that *modernist* seriousness spent a century trying to exile from their serious art. Her tufted objects occupy the ambiguous space

between rug, sculpture, and painting.

What unites these practices is the absence of anxiousness around their use of materials. These materials are not being smuggled into fine art under defensive theoretical armor. They are being used because they carry the histories, economies, and emotional registers that these particular artists, in this particular place, need. The question of craft versus fine art, which occupied so much critical energy in the twentieth century, isn't decisive here. It has already been settled in practice, without allowing itself to become ethnographic display, which is itself a kind of formal

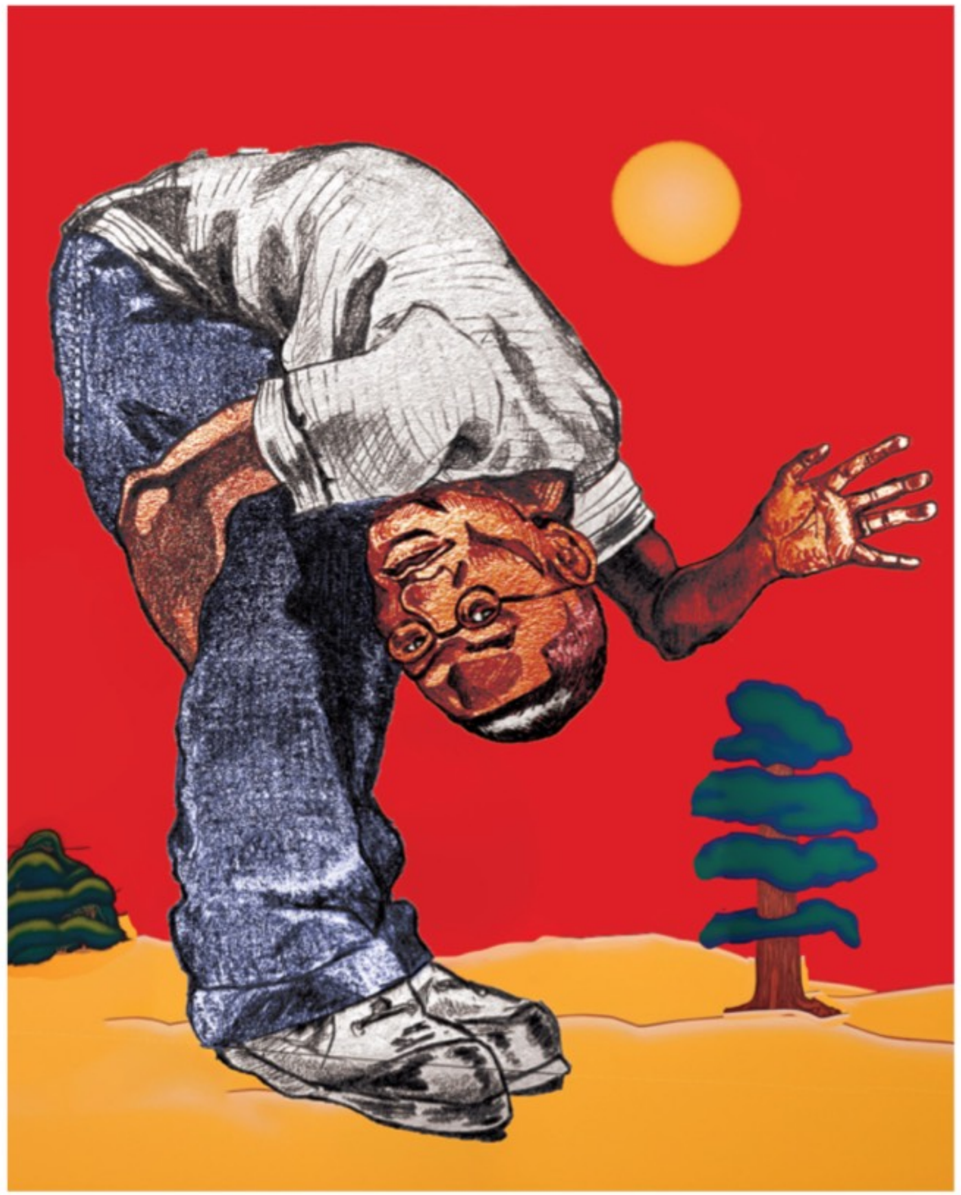
precision, a refusal of the speed with which Western looking tends to consume other people's histories.

Heather Beardsley's work brings a different material intelligence into the conversation, the language of science..of ecological aftermath, of what happens when human ambition fails and the non-human world continues. Her Strange Plants series, begun after she visited Chernobyl's exclusion zone, where vegetation had overtaken abandoned structures, involves embroidering plant life onto photographs and found textiles, allowing nature to creep back across cities and domestic linens with a beauty that becomes more unsettling the longer you look at it. In a region defined by rising water, military infrastructure, and the constant presence of erosion and flood, Beardsley's work feels less like an imported environmental concern than a local prophecy. She is not mourning nature or condemning industry. She is asking a harder question: what visual evidence does a civilization leave behind, and what forms of life continue speaking after it's gone? The Chrysler Museum's acquisition of her work alongside Finn's marks a shift in what regional institutions are willing to preserve.

V. New Types of Images

IMAGE is my underdeveloped, meandering philosophical series of unresolved questions around images in the twenty first century. An echo of the same questions that were being asked in the twentieth century. It almost feels like every single image or picture that can make us feel something has been created and no more can exist.

Have we crossed over the crisis of painting? If the material argument is about what survives the image, what resists generation, what insists on the body, then the new image argument is about what happens inside the flood. STRONG



I'm in pursuit of this type of image, which I've been calling STRONG IMAGE. It felt hopeless, UNTIL artificial intelligence reached the point where it can generate art. It felt like an "ah ha" moment, similar to when the camera "replaced" portrait painters or landscape painters.. rendering them obsolete. It's the precise moment when Impressionism was invented. I needed something in my lifetime to respond to, to rebel against. "What can a human do that artificial intelligence can't?" Make mistakes? No, ai does that too. I'm not sure what it is, but I'm excited about it. The more it spits out, the more boring the output and the more humanism and humanists want humanity and human centered and human created work. I will attempt to speak about my own practice as a third party observer.

Matthew S. Pierce (b. 1995) is a Virginia-based contemporary painter whose work combines post-internet image culture with neo-expressionist figuration. Using digital tools as a preparatory language, Pierce transforms found imagery, popular culture, and personal archives into psychologically charged paintings that explore identity, memory, and the construction of contemporary icons. The son of two pastors, trained in graphic design, and working in the skate apparel industry, making representational paintings and non-objective works and documentary films simultaneously.

His McDonald's imagery is funny and serious. Humor amplifies in this case. Pierce's Grimace Guadalupe and Ronald Repeat are not ironic or detached. They treat the corporate icon with the same attention a religious painter might bring to a saint, because in the visual environment Pierce grew up inside, these images functioned with the same ubiquity, the same claim on consciousness, the same capacity to organize feeling. To make

them funny and then MORE than funny, risking vulgarity. This is one of its central virtues. The material is vulgar and it's not “fine”. The content infiltrated childhoods through pervasive and relentless propaganda. This is part of his relentless pursuit of images that hold power today. The STRONG IMAGE philosophy.

Sam Clayman brings to Hampton Roads its comic subconscious, and comedy in the tradition Clayman is working in,

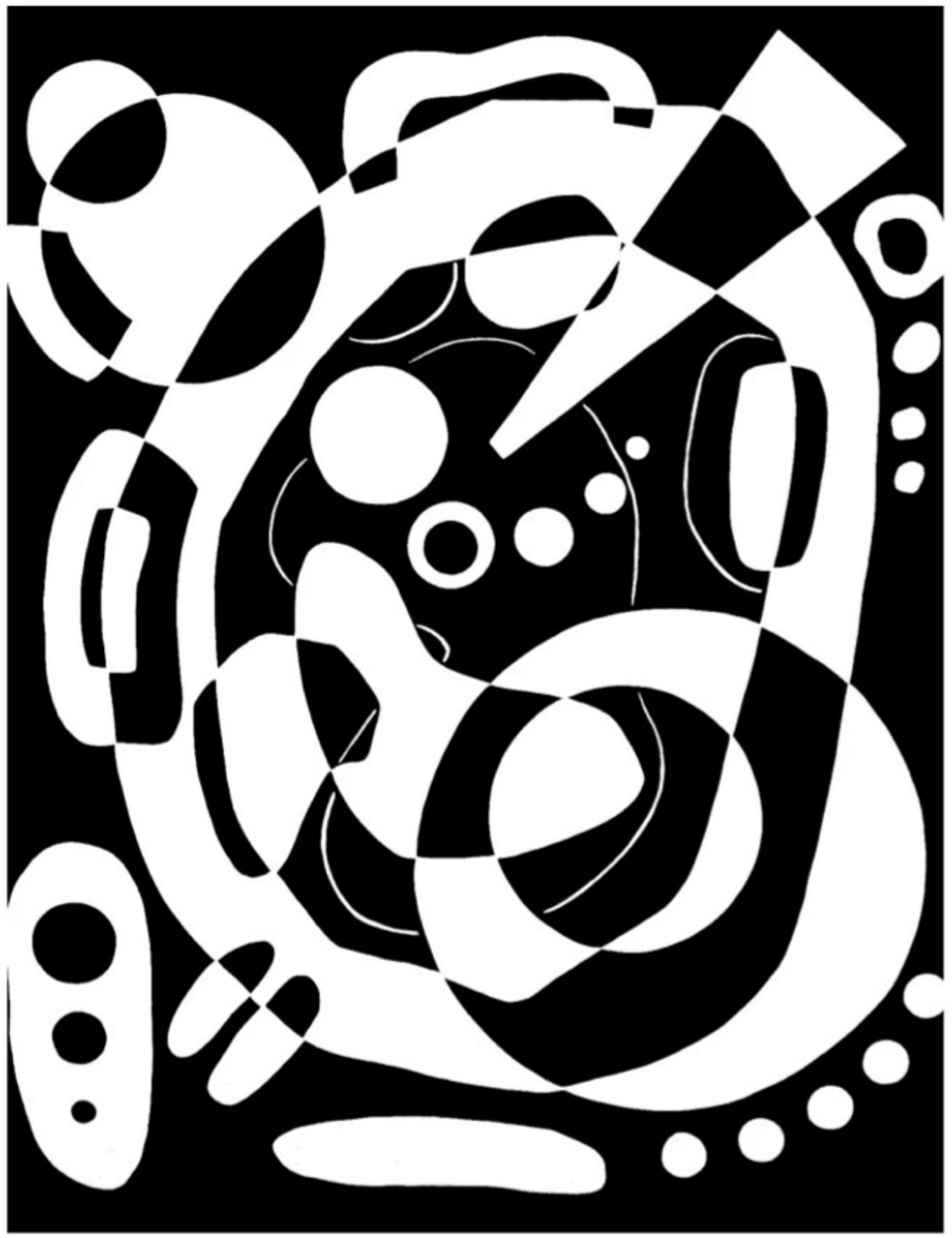
underground comics, lowbrow illustration, the American grotesque has always been a more accurate sociology than the official portrait.

His beach figures, seagulls, coastal degenerates, and boardwalk absurdities do not ask to be dignified by fine-art seriousness. They are already serious because they are so specific. His work

around Pharrell's Jellyfish Sneakers campaign demonstrated how a regional visual dialect can enter global circulation without being cleaned of its weirdness. He does not flatten Virginia Beach into a brand. He lets it remain awkward and alive, which is the only honest way to represent it. Polite institutions often misunderstand Clayman at first because his intelligence arrives wearing the mask of stupidity. This is a venerable strategy. The grotesque joke that turns out to be sociology. The caricature that turns out to be a mirror. This attitude connects Clayman and Pierce.

Hampton Boyer is one of my favorite painters and is a mythical being in my view. He operates within truth, fiction and folklore. Black abstraction meets personal grief, meeting the improvisational structure of jazz. But where Pierce presses into the image, Boyer presses into the mark. His canvases and paper works are built from syncopation, compression, release, geometric velocity. They absorb influences from graphic novels, music, and architecture without being reducible to any of them. Boyer has described his practice as "ever evolving, mostly finding

inspiration from the black body and the environment that provides conditioning." He paints from a flow state that is also, always, a survival state. "It means a lot for me to create another day," he has said, "because as an artist, my creative flow state is what keeps me surviving."

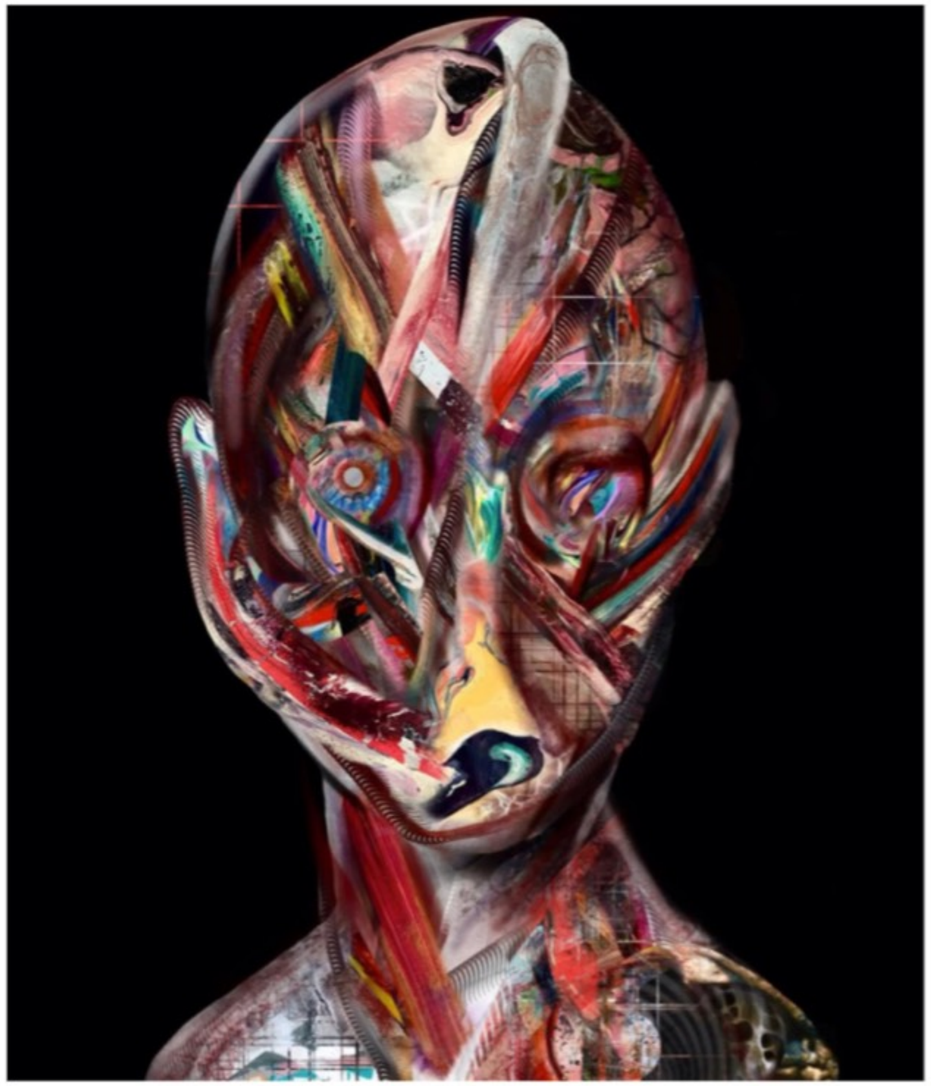


Dathan Kane's black-and-white public forms have by now altered the civic atmosphere of Hampton Roads in a way that is impossible to ignore. The comparison to Keith Haring is

available, and Kane doesn't shy from it. Kane is not Haring's successor in any stylistic sense. The kinship is philosophical: both believe that a public visual language can carry real depth without surrendering accessibility, that abstraction belongs outside as much as in the museum, that symbols can move through a city faster. Kane's forms negotiate, crowd, breathe, and interrupt each other. The work's optimism is structural rather than sentimental. It believes in balance because it knows imbalance.

Nadd Harvin: of all my peers in practice, she is perhaps the closest in kinship to me as far as what we're doing, though our methods differ. Her post-internet figurations and her instinct for extracting poignant moments, documenting the thing before it disappears.. align us. Drawing seems to be her true passion; painting feels secondary. I am making broad strokes about her character, but she seems Virginian through and through. Which is exactly what I mean as a compliment. Nadd Harvin is a self-taught figure painter, muralist, and teaching artist whose work uses realism as a vehicle for abstract expression, compositions that, as Harvin has put it, "blossom into endless storytelling possibilities." Connected to the CAN through the Newport News Street Museum project, which brought monumental murals to a city long considered an artistic desert, Harvin moves between canvas, mural, installation, and community practice with cool ease. Their work in blue ink explores identity, spirituality, and representation, the questions that don't have answers. In Harvin we see what it looks like when process IS the argument: the act of making becomes a way of getting closer to, as Harvin has written, "our reason for existing."

Rain Spann's work carries what I can only describe as cosmological persistence. His sewn paper constructions, painted forms, and foliage ornaments contain eyes, roots, bones, and irregular silhouettes that grow outward from their edges as if the image were a living thing that could not be contained by format. Nature in Spann's work is not scenery. It is consciousness. Bodies and landscapes pass into one another; roots become nerves, branches become limbs, eyes appear like ancestral witnesses who have been watching the whole time. He brings cosmology into the Hampton Roads conversation without theatrical mysticism. The work feels searched-for rather than performed, which is the hardest thing to achieve and the most important.



Jay Young's portraits have been subjected to forces that are psychological, technological, and painterly all at once. Faces twist, melt, fracture, and reassemble. They carry the residue of screens and surveillance alongside older forms of painterly struggle. There is something in Young that recalls Bacon's theatrical injury, though Young is less cruel than Bacon, less

interested in the meat of the body than in the instability of perception. There is something of Pollock too, but not the heroic Pollock of American myth, rather a Pollock turned back toward the face, forced to discover that the arena was not only the canvas but the head itself. His work is like Tetsuo in Akira, when he was just starting to morph, before he imploded. Young's best works allow the image to remain genuinely at risk. You feel, standing in front of them, that the painting could still fail.

Andy Harris offers something the scene also needs: the quiet work, the patient work, His botanical forms and natural surfaces are occasions for thinking about edge, composition, and the intimacy of looking. In a cultural moment addicted to scale and declaration, Harris's modesty is a form of argument.

VII.

I am just asking the question: can we be as good as New York in the 50s? Can we be as good as LA in the 60s? Is it possible? And what will it take? How hard do we push each other? How directly do we critique one another's work? How often do we engage with history, and how often do we host exhibitions of local talent that will shake up the public?

Artists have a responsibility to document, question, and respond to the world we are living through. Not because art will fix it. But because the record matters. Because someone has to keep making things by hand, from the body, from the specific, from the place, from the palimpsest. Because when everything can be generated, the human mark is the argument.

I have been making artwork since I was five years old. I studied at the Governor's School for the Arts in high school, traveled to Asia to continue my studies, and went on to earn my BFA in Fine Arts. I worked professionally in graphic arts for over seven years and have been a cultural participant in Virginia's arts scene since I was a kid. These experiences have equipped me to speak on this, but more than credentials, what equips me is simply being HERE. Being inside this. Knowing these people. Seeing this work form in real time.

There are emerging artists, beginners, hobbyists, and people trying to hop on the wave. I am focused on the contemporary scholarly practitioners, the people who have committed to this for real. I want to talk about everyone, but I can't. It's not possible to mention everyone and do justice to what they do. So this is one piece of the puzzle in the archive of this place. I will share my thoughts openly and honestly, with admiration and a critical eye.

VIII.

There is infrastructure forming around this scene beyond the CAN, and it matters enormously.

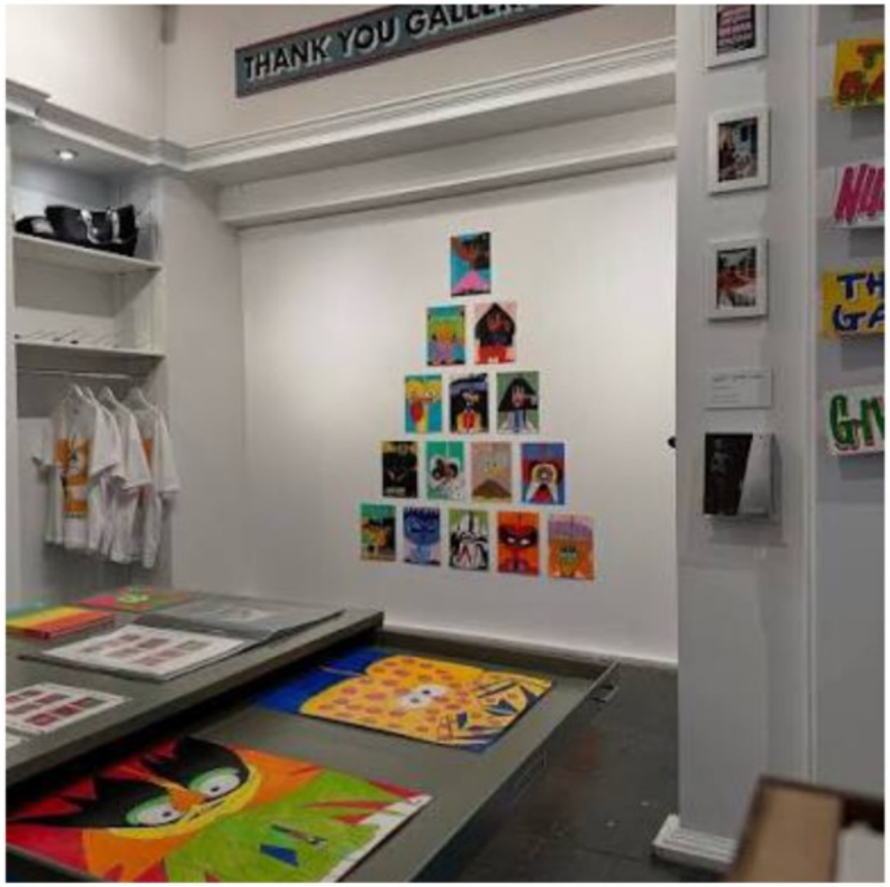
Alison Byrne's leadership of Virginia MOCA, particularly as the institution moves into its new home on the campus of Virginia Wesleyan University, gives the region the most ambitious institutional platform it has had at precisely the moment its artists are ready for it. The new MOCA is not incidental to this moment. Its arrival signals a regional institution willing to

imagine itself with national/international seriousness, while championing local talent. and willing to do so from the Hampton Roads rather than in spite of it.

WHERE WE MEET
This exhibition marks a special moment in Virginia MOCA's story
As our final exhibition in this building, Where We Meet is a tribute to the Hampton Roads community. Whether someone has lived here for years, a few months, or just passed through, it is the people and the connections they make that have shaped both this region and this museum.
To achieve this, we invited artists from across Hampton Roads
reflect on themes drawn from our memories, our values, our
landscapes, and our desires. Their work was selected by a ju
exhibitions staff, artists, and cultural organizers rooted in o
region. The result is a collective portrait of the values, hope
lived experiences that define this moment and will guide ou
Virginia MOCA extends its sincere gratitude to the artists for sharing their work with us. Appreciation is also extend community jury for their thoughtful e throughout the selec ctive dedication was ins We Meet:

Kate Pittman's work with the ViBe Creative District operates from the other direction: not the museum as destination, but the district as lived cultural atmosphere, murals and public installations and creative placemaking converting ordinary urban space into artistic encounter in Virginia Beach. If Byrne represents the institutional opening, Pittman represents the civic ground beneath it.

Eric Wiggins and Heather Hakimzadeh's Seamless: Art and Design exhibition at Virginia MOCA, which brought Barry McGee, Eric Haze, Shepard Fairey, Shantell Martin, and others into conversation with broader questions of art and design, matters because it addresses something the Hampton Roads artists seem to know instinctively: contemporary visual intelligence no longer remains obedient to inherited categories. The “outer world” and the museum are not opposites. Design and fine art are not opposites. Commerce and critique are not opposites. or rather, they have not been opposites for long enough that insisting on the distinction now is mostly an institutional convenience, not an aesthetic reality.



Anthony Coleman's Exhibition at ThankYou Gallery in Virginia MOCA's gift shop.

ThankYou Gallery, around figures like Doddie Braza, Bryan Woodland, and Eric Wiggins, has understood how to move between art, design, retail, and community effortlessly. Its presence inside Virginia MOCA's gift shop, a dedicated space for rotating exhibitions in the museum's periphery, is one of those gestures that appears modest until you consider what it implies: that the edge of the institution can also be a site of authorship.

Chelsea Pierce, Heather Hakimzadeh, Eric Wiggins, and Lucas Matheson represent a curatorial condition specific to this moment and this place: they are close enough to see the work and experience the artists before it has learned how to explain itself. They know which gestures are borrowed, which are earned, which are fragile, which are becoming central. This proximity would

make certain institutional minds nervous, but it shouldn't. Movements are not born from detachment. They're born from overinvestment.

IX. Where's Our Leo Castelli?

There is money around art in the Hampton Roads, but money alone doesn't make culture. Patronage can preserve, but it can also pacify. It can build museums while leaving the most dangerous artists unsupported. It can buy beauty and avoid difficulty. Every region has its comfortable collecting habits: the tasteful landscape, the family pet portrait, the coastal view, the painting that confirms rather than disturbs the identity of the place.

This type of work has its audience, and not all of it is without merit, but no serious art history has ever been built from comfort.

The young artists of Hampton Roads are pushing against that inheritance whether they say so directly or not.

Their work is not content to decorate the region's self-image because it complicates it and brings in ecological ruin, diasporic niche, commercial vulgarity, and spiritual unease. This is precisely the work a region needs when it is ready to become more than just picturesque.

What the Hampton Roads needs now is taste with courage. The next great patron of this region will not be the person who buys the safest painting at the gala. It's time to level up. It's time to lift the local consciousness. Castelli didn't matter because he had money near him; he mattered because he understood that Rauschenberg, Johns, Lichtenstein, Warhol, and Stella were structural shifts in the language of art.

The Hampton Roads needs that kind of conviction now. Not patronage as charity, but patronage as acceleration, patronage as risk, patronage as the construction of careers.

A word to my fellow artists: When attention arrives, it will try to simplify what is happening here into a consumable regional trend. It will look for one story, one look, one spokesperson, one easily exportable myth. That's a mistake.. The strength of this scene lies in its density of difference. Its unity is atmospheric, not stylistic.

Another danger for us now is premature mythology, because a movement can be killed by neglect, but it can also be damaged by praise. If we're all packaged too neatly, we will lose the instability that makes it worth watching. Our strength is not that every artist is equally resolved. They aren't. Some are still searching. Some works are stronger than others..this is good because a movement without unevenness is usually dead. Don't sand down the roughness until the region becomes palatable to collectors. We must build up enough criticism, patronage, and institutional support around the work that its difficulty can develop rather than be corrected.

The next serious patron, collector, critic, or dealer who comes here should come with a lot of patience. Not to extract a few artists and congratulate themselves for being early, but to understand the ecology that made the work possible. This means building studios, hosting exhibitions, writing books, art acquisitions, residencies, photo documentation, intellectual criticism, and sustained financial support. It means understanding that movements aren't built by removing artists from their conditions as quickly as possible. Sometimes the job is to make the conditions strong enough that the

artists don't have to leave in order to be taken seriously.

The art world likes the voyeurism of discovery, but it doesn't like the responsibility that follows. Discovery without commitment is tourism. The Hampton Roads doesn't need more tourism. It needs belief backed by structure and capital.

The comparison to earlier movements should be made carefully. Hampton Roads is not the new Abstract Expressionism, or the new Harlem Renaissance.

Such comparisons flatter and distort in equal measure. The better claim is that the Hampton Roads may be one of the first major post-central art regions of the twenty-first century: a place where artists absorb global image culture while remaining psychologically tied to a specific geography; where curators and artists remain close enough to each other to form some trust.

The old centers will have difficulty seeing this at first because they are trained to recognize importance after it's gotten some manners. Hampton Roads does not yet have those manners, which is fortunate, since manners often come at the expense of force.What is happening here still has force. This is how movements begin: as repeated acts of recognition. The tide has not arrived all at once. It has been moving underneath. By the time the larger art world notices the surface changing, the deeper motion may already be irreversible.

X.

The scene is underdeveloped and still infantile, but it presents us all with an opportunity to jumpstart our careers and maybe even stay here. With ample space and enough funding to take artists out of “survival mode” you will begin to see some of the greatest work to emerge from this region. The best is ahead of us.

Signed,

June 26th, 2026

Matthew S. Pierce